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SOCCKER Spreads Hope. By: Shryock, Kathleen Wilson. Faces (07491387), Dec2006, Vol. 23 Issue 4, p16-19, 4p, 4 color; Abstract: The article focuses on soccer player Nicolette Iribarne from Mission Viejo, California. Through her travels, the high school senior has discovered that soccer brings people together. During her 13 years as a soccer player, Iribarne and her adventurous family have journeyed to many countries. For Iribarne, one of the most gratifying moments occurred when a U.S. Marine contacted her in December 2005. Reading Level (Lexile): 1010; (AN 23489902)

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SOCCKER Spreads Hope

Nicolette Iribarne has played soccer on a grassy plain in Honduras, near elephants in Thailand, and on well-manicured fields in her hometown of Mission Viejo, California. Through her travels, the high school senior has discovered that soccer brings people together. This realization motivated Iribarne to establish an organisation that provides soccer balls to children in refugee camps around the globe. Her goal is not only to help these children find a fun way to play, but also to provide them with hope and a connection to the rest of the world.

During her 13 years as a soccer player, Iribarne and her adventurous family have journeyed to many countries. Her younger brother and sister also enjoy soccer, and frequently the siblings would take to the streets for a friendly game. Usually, local children would join the lively diversion. Iribarne noticed that in almost every country she visited, soccer provided a common bond. Just one ball and a little enthusiasm often united children in a frolicking game that lasted for hours.

In the summer of 2004, Iribarne was one of four Americans selected to travel to Mexico, Spain, and Portugal. The trip included 300 teens from 48 countries. "On that trip, I discovered how difficult it was to interact with other young people since there were so many cultural differences," says Iribarne. Again, she discovered that soccer offered a universal language and that most of the kids knew how to play. "The game of soccer led to instant friendship and showed me that beneath our cultural shields, our cores are all the same," she says.

It was on this trip that Iribarne also experienced the pain of prejudice when an American flag carried by a friend was taken and set on fire. "That experience made me want to help others who also have been innocent victims of ignorance and hate," says Iribarne.

Iribarne shared her experiences with family and friends. The desire to make a difference led to a brainstorming session. The group wanted to do something that would connect people of different cultures. The knowledge that soccer is loved all over the world became the focus. Iribarne wondered what would happen if soccer balls were provided to less fortunate children, and Fútbol 4 Refugees was born.

Fueled by excitement, Iribarne contacted everyone she knew, asking for support. At first progress was slow, but Iribarne did not quit. Instead, she made contact with Oliver Wyss, a soccer coach she had met through her volunteer work at a summer camp. Wyss is a professional soccer player and founder of Soccer for Hope, a nonprofit organization that provides assistance to children with severe illnesses. Wyss was supportive of Iribarne's idea. He suggested that an account for Fútbol 4 Refugees be set up within his organization so donations could be easily processed. Wyss also donated 25 balls.

Since then, Iribarne has promoted her project by speaking at team gatherings and parent meetings. She has even contacted well-known corporations. In response to her call, Reebok donated new equipment.

Friends and teammates have provided support by distributing posters outlining the need for balls, pumps, and money to pay for shipping costs. To date, Fútbol 4 Refugees has collected more than 600 soccer balls. The balls have been sent to children in Azerbaijan, Colombia, Mexico, and to hurricane victims in New Orleans, Louisiana.

For Iribarne, one of the most gratifying moments occurred when a U.S. Marine contacted her in December 2005. He wanted to personally deliver balls to children living in war-torn Iraq. The Marine later reported that the balls were well received by groups of enthusiastic children.

To help spread the message that the balls are a symbol of hope for the children who receive them, Iribarne and friends decorate the balls with drawings representing love, peace, and friendship. Her sister Gabriela's soccer team has joined forces to collect and illustrate balls with brightly colored rainbows and flowers. "I found it so exciting that these girls, though younger than 10, understood that they could bring hope and a smile to another kid on the other side of the world," states Iribarne.

After Iribarne graduates from high school, her family will travel to Peru, where they will deliver more than 100 balls and jerseys to refugees. Iribarne plans to attend the University of California in Santa Barbara. She understands that she will be busy with new responsibilities. Still, Iribarne knows that soccer will always be an important part of her life. She wants to play recreational soccer in college. She also hopes to keep Fútbol 4 Refugees alive through the efforts of her sister and hometown friends. "This project isn't just about collecting soccer balls," says Iribarne. "It's about helping people. It's not our differences that make us stronger, but working with our similarities."

To learn about how you can help, contact futbol4refugees@hotmail.com.

A brainstorming session is when members of a group freely share ideas as a way of seeking solutions to a problem.

PHOTO (COLOR): From Sudan to South Dakota — soccer means fun.

PHOTO (COLOR): Nicolette sees hope, love, and peace in a soccer ball.

PHOTO (COLOR): Wartime means little or no playtime for kids. A Marine hopes this soccer ball will lift the spirits of the Iraqi boy.

PHOTO (COLOR): Wanna play? Nicolette found it's easy to make friends when you're kicking around a soccer ball.

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By Kathleen Wilson Shryock

Kathleen Wilson Shryock is a freelance writer who lives in Olathe, Kansas, with her husband, two children, two cats, and dog. She enjoys writing about positive role models.

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